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Pat Kourt

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CHEYENNE MEMORIES

By Pat Kourt

Deserted and almost forgotten as it lies quietly on a Blaine County hilltop is Whirlwind Cemetery. Just in sight of the South Canadian River, the weed-covered resting place of several Cheyenne Indians is lulled by the rhythmic pump of an oil site or a cawing crow floating on the wind. Once a bustling Cheyenne day school and mission, this location lies southeast of the tiny Fay community. Just a few hundred yards from the cemetery is an Oklahoma Historical Society granite monument recognizing the school.

Historically, Whirlwind Cemetery is named for Chief Whirlwind, a peace-loving Southern Cheyenne chief who is remembered as an important spokesman for his people after he became head tribal chief in 1874. In fact, the chief was instrumental in preventing a major war during that same year. Considered peaceful, Whirlwind is recorded by historians as having presented many complaints to white agents to fight federal bureaucracy that plagued his people. Accounts relate that Chief Whirlwind protested that some Indians wanted to farm, but only a few received plows and implements. An instance of the chief's ire occurred in 1878 when he asked for an issue of calico for a shirt and received only a handkerchief-sized piece of cloth. Also, during lean times for the Cheyenne, Chief Whirlwind asked the government for ammunition to kill antelope to fill the Indians' meatless days. However, rations were always short for the almost-civilized tribe.

Renowned Western artist and New Yorker, Frederic Remington, began a travel throughout the Southwest in the early spring of 1884. Among his visitations was a stay for several days at the camp of the aging Chief Whirlwind. Remington's journal reveals an intimate look at Whirlwind and his people. With an interpreter's help, the artist and the chief communicated well and gained respect for each other—but only after Whirlwind became assured that Remington wasn't a government official!



In one journal entry, Remington wrote that the chief was "a very progressive man" who talked of his concern for the Indian children's education. For hours at a time, the two men would sit in the chief's ramada and talk of Cheyenne culture. Remington viewed the old chief as not only progressive but also as one who "knew more about Indians, Indian policy, and the tendencies and impulses of the white men concerning his race than any other person I had ever met."

Because of his years of progressiveness, Chief Whirlwind's name was used in 1897 for a Cheyenne day school which was moved from Darlington (near El Reno) to the present Blaine County location near the present cemetery site. Later, from 1904-1917, Whirlwind became a well-known mission school under the auspices of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Noted leader at the school was David Pendleton Oakerhater.

As a young man, Oakerhater was a strong personality among the Cheyennes. He was one of the seven hundred chosen Plains warriors who fought in the Battle of Adobe Walls on June 24, 1874. Too, he was charged with being a

ringleader in open rebellions against government agents. Oakerhater was one of twenty-eight Cheyennes who were arrested and taken by army wagon to Fort Marion, an old military prison in St. Augustine, Florida. At the time, David was just past thirty years of age and seemed to have the unfaltering respect of his peers. Because he was a natural leader, Oakerhater was selected to be a sergeant of the police force for the Indian prisoners.

While he was in Florida, David taught archery to the daughters of a Mrs. Pendleton, who later paid his expenses to upstate New York for three years in Christian ministry with the Episcopal Diocese of Central New York. He and three other ministerial students studied with the Reverend and Mrs. John B. Wicks.

Mrs. Pendleton's husband had been instrumental in establishing Carlisle Institute of Indian Education; and because of the Pendleton connection with Oakerhater, the young Indian was asked to recruit Indian students from the plains. Also, Oakerhater revered the Pendletons so much that he was allowed to take the name "David Pendleton" in a special service.

In June, 1881, a few months after David's wife and the child had died, he and Reverend Wicks set out for Cheyenne country to establish missions. The man who had been leading rebellions a few years before was now a peace counselor with Christianity as his tool.

Reverend Wicks built a home and mission near Fay, northwest of the Darlington Agency. Oakerhater traveled throughout the region with Wicks as his interpreter. The two conducted regular Christian services in Indian camps, agency school buildings, or tents. Children were taught Christian principles and simple education skills.

After three successful years, Wicks had to leave the Indian mission work because of poor health. However, Oakerhater remained as the only ordained representative of the Episcopal Church in Indian Territory. His continued duties included weddings and burials.

Later in 1894, the Reverend David Stanford, who could speak the Cheyenne language, joined Oakerhater to serve neighboring camps at Bridgeport and Darlington. Then in 1897, fifteen students were enrolled in the day school near Fay on Chief Whirlwind's allotment. Oakerhater carried on the work there with the children. Their parents and other immediate family members camped on the land near the school. It was a year later that Oakerhater married Minnie, his second wife. The couple made their home in the church facility.

In 1901, the government day school was closed and the Indian children were sent to boarding schools. The school building was given to Chief Whirlwind's widow. At the time, many people believed that mission work in the Whirlwind area would cease. However, in 1904, Mrs. Whirlwind gave the original school building to the Episcopal Church to use as a mission day school

for unhealthy children who couldn't attend other government schools. As many children as possible, regardless of their physical condition, were enrolled. In 1907, twenty-five students attended the school.

Nine years later, the government pressed the Episcopal Church to close Whirlwind School. The next year, the mission school was closed; the building was deconsecrated; and Oakerhater was retired after thirty-six years of Christian work as a deacon.

Today, Oakerhater is still remembered as an apostle to his people. As a Cheyenne leader, he is thought of as being a peace chief and as fulfilling his role in the highest tradition of the Cheyenne people. Oakerhater's work is immortalized by a large brass marker in St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Oklahoma City. Also, on September 6, 1981, a grave stone was laid to mark Oakerhater's burial site in the Whirlwind Cemetery. It recognized the one hundredth anniversary of the deacon's ordination to the diaconate of the Episcopal Church, and it noted a century of missionary work among the Cheyennes.

Another celebration occurred in 1983 to recognize the Cheyenne people buried in the one-acre cemetery. Because only four grave markers remained, a large gray stone monument, with every name engraved, was dedicated. A deed to the cemetery land, originally part of Whirlwind's 160-acre allotment, was given to the Cheyenne tribe. Even more recently, the annual dance to honor Oakerhater's life and his ministry is held at Roman Nose Park, north of Watonga. Like many Indians who are proud of their native heritage, Craig and Lori (Rice) Penner of Thomas have given their son the Indian name *Whirlwind*. Consequently, the legends and stories remain alive and are told often.

The panoramic hilltop location that was once filled with children's laughter, serious camp talk, and family celebrations... is today a quiet cemetery with only memories of a former bustling life.

Turkeylegs... Riggs...
Red Shin... Shortneck
Howlingcrane...

These family names, along with *Whirlwind* and *Oakerhater*, are just a few of the Cheyennes that are part of today's cherished thoughts about the tiny Whirlwind Cemetery. The land may be deserted, but the periodic sprays of flowers left by a loved one prove that Cheyenne memories aren't forgotten. ●



PAT KOURT, regular WESTVIEW contributor, and her husband, Randall, a pharmacist in Thomas, are SOSU alumni. Their three sons—Mark, Todd, and Brent—are SOSU students. Pat teaches English IV and Creative Writing at Thomas High School, where she is also librarian.

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